



Report in Brief

March 16, 2017

Background

The Census Bureau (the Bureau) recognizes that fundamental changes to the design, implementation, and management of the 2020 Census must occur in order to conduct the next decennial census at a lower cost (per housing unit and adjusted for inflation) than the 2010 Census. The 2010 Census cost approximately \$13 billion. The Bureau estimates that if it were to conduct the 2020 Census just as it conducted the 2010 Census, then the next decennial census would cost \$17.8 billion. By implementing a number of innovations, the Bureau expects that the 2020 Census will cost \$12.5 billion, avoiding \$5.3 billion of the estimated cost.

Why We Did This Review

We initiated our evaluation of the 2016 Census Test to review (1) the effectiveness of the new management structure and (2) the effectiveness of the OCS to support NRFU operations. Our first objective was to determine whether the Bureau documented its decision to utilize the enumerator-to-supervisor ratios selected for the 2016 test. Our second objective was to determine whether the Bureau designed the test to (a) assess the effectiveness of the OCS in supporting supervisors during NRFU operations by comparing 2016 test results to results of previous tests; and (b) determine the feasibility and effectiveness of a higher enumerator-to-supervisor ratio compared to the 2010 Census.

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

2020 Census: 2016 Census Test Indicates the Current Life-Cycle Cost Estimate is Incomplete and Underestimates Nonresponse Followup Costs

OIG-17-020-I

WHAT WE FOUND

During our assessment of cost data and the cost estimate—just as we found during prior tests—we identified problems with the Bureau’s method for calculating potential cost avoidance during the 2020 Census. The current cost estimate contains assumptions that underestimate nonresponse followup (NRFU) costs.

Regarding our second objective we found that the Bureau cannot (1) determine the feasibility and effectiveness of a higher enumerator-to-supervisor ratio because flaws to the design and methodology of the test hinder the Bureau’s ability to answer research questions, or (2) assess the operational control system’s (OCS’s) capacity to effectively and efficiently manage NRFU operations.

Finally, we identified training limitations, which potentially impact the quality and protection of household data collected by enumerators. Also, we found that the 2016 Census Test Study Plan included inaccurate statements and assumptions about past research.

The 2020 Census life-cycle cost estimate assumes: (1) housing unit visits are limited to six attempts; and (2) all housing units are enumerated after the maximum number of allowed contact attempts. We found that this is not the case and if not corrected, NRFU costs will be underestimated. According to the Government Accountability Office, a credible cost estimate should include an independent review of the estimate and recognize and document excluded costs.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

We recommend that the Director of the Census Bureau take the following actions:

1. Ensure that the 2020 Census life-cycle cost estimate accurately reflects all relevant cost factors and excluded costs are documented.
2. Designate appropriate personnel to independently verify that tests are properly designed to answer research questions.
3. Work with the Office of General Counsel to develop enumerator scheduling guidance; and implement the most efficient NRFU enumeration scheduling practices.
4. Implement internal controls in the new operational control system that (a) prevent supervisors from ignoring alerts and inform managers that alerts were not responded to in a timely manner; and (b) provide supervisors with sufficient detail to resolve alerts.
5. Revise training to ensure field staff are adequately prepared to conduct proxy interviews and securely transmit paper questionnaires for processing.